

Daily News (Bowling Green, KY)

Even with diplomas in hand, new grads face tough road

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Published: April 5, 2009

In a sense, Brittney Joiner said she was lied to by her high school counselors and teachers.

"It's sad because when you're in high school they told us as long as we went to college and got a degree we could get any job we wanted to," the Western Kentucky University senior said. "And it's just not true; you need a Ph.D to get any job now."

The Hopkinsville native is one of hundreds of seniors who will descend from the Hill at graduation next month and stack their resumes against the thousands of unemployed workers and laid-off professionals **with** years of experience.

And **with** part-time restaurant and retail jobs being absorbed by former professionals, the thought of moving the tassel on their graduation caps is giving many seniors anxiety.

"If I had (fore)seen the economy downturn, I wouldn't have worked so hard to get done in four years," Joiner said. "I wouldn't be looking ahead of me and seeing graduation in a month, it would be a year down the road."

Like many other seniors, the psychology major said she's now considering going to graduate school to see if she can ride out the downturn before heads into the job market.

"I wanted to take a year off, but I'm probably going to go to grad school," she said. "It's very nerve-wracking, but I guess I can always live **with** my parents if things don't work out."

Grad school is no longer an option for Greenville psychology grad student Zane Dempsey. Dempsey will graduate in May **with** his master's degree, and while he already has a job working in counseling and special education assessment at a local school, the economy threatens the future of his career, which depends on state funds.

"Lucky for me, my job has to be done," he said. "... But I know it's weighing on everyone's minds."

If the schools think students can handle heavier caseloads, he said, they may cut personnel.

Becky Bennett, director of the Career Services Center at WKU, said the fastest growing fields requiring a bachelor's degree or higher are in the health and medical fields, mental health, computer software, and marriage and family counseling.

Bennett said she recommends graduates looking for jobs attempt to volunteer in their career field while working on the desired skills for the job through continued education or part-time work.

She said it's important to start the job search as soon as possible, as is posting resumes on job search sites, including the career center's at www.wku.edu/topjobs.

For Tompkinsville senior Savannah Thomas, an advertising major at WKU, having a resume is not going to be enough to set herself apart from other applicants **with** more experience.

Thomas said she is working on a digital resume and Web site through the advertising department, and will be seeking advice from others in the field during a Webinar being hosted by the department.

"They recommend you have two to three internships by graduation, but that's difficult, especially if they're unpaid," she said. "Grad school is definitely looking really good right now."

Despite the increased competition, Thomas pointed out that her generation has some advantages as it ventures into the job market. She said industries will realize they can pay the incoming "greenies" much less than the former professionals, while her fellow classmates also boast a better mastery of technology and Web skills.

"It's probably all equal at the end of the day," she said.

But not all positions vacated because of layoffs are being filled.

Travis Garner came to WKU from Albuquerque, N.M., to obtain a photojournalism degree and move into the newspaper industry. But seeing newspapers like the Pulitzer Prize-winning Rocky Mountain News permanently stop their presses, he said, is disheartening.

"It's a scary thing to be putting your future in news in a time when they are closing organizations doing such great things," he said. "Not only are we competing **with** talented photographers coming out of school, but people in the industry for years now (who are now) without a job."

Garner said he plans to complete an internship during the summer **with** the News & Guide in Jackson Hole, Wyo., and will continue to seek other internships until he finds permanent work. The senior said he is also looking into teaching Spanish abroad in a six-month program, which would allow him to perform research and complete a photo project to enhance his portfolio.

Even working temporarily for a nonprofit, where he could gain experience and give back **with** his work, may be an option.

Garner said he is optimistic that people will miss the accountability and need for print news and that it will bounce back eventually.

"Whether they find a new way for people to get news or if it eventually bounces back or until I can find a niche that will help me pay the bills, I just don't expect the job of my dreams right away," he said. "I'll just go where photography takes me."

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